

## **Marital Satisfaction and Conflict in Purchasing Decisions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this study the influence of marital satisfaction on spouse's assessment of purchasing situations is investigated. Wives and husbands from 79 households rated their well-being in, and frequency of, situations where they imagined buying or not buying a desired commodity, with the partner either agreeing or disagreeing with the purchase. Essentially, we found that the more satisfying the relationship, the more often the spouses reported experiencing situations associated with positive well-being, the more frequently the spouses supported each other's purchase desires, and the less often spouses reported being in conflict with each other.

This study investigates the influence of marital happiness on spouses' well-being in, and frequency of, purchasing situations. We hypothesize that marital happiness is significantly related to the frequency of unpleasant purchasing situations occurring in the partnership, the frequency of disagreement between spouses, the mutual support provided by the spouses, and the spouses' readiness to reject a purchase desire if the partner disagrees and the item is not really needed.

More specifically, we expect that (a) happy couples are more likely to avoid purchasing situations associated with negative mood than are unhappy couples. Furthermore, avoidance of unpleasant situations implies (b) that happy spouses report disagreements with each other in purchasing decision situations less frequently than do unhappy spouses.

We expect that happy spouses support their partner's purchasing desires more often than unhappy spouses who may provide support less often. Thus, (c) active spouses in happy marriages should report agreement by the passive spouse more often than unhappy spouses do. Moreover, unhappy spouses are expected to realize their egoistic purchasing intentions irrespective of the partner's opposition more often than happy spouses. Thus, (d) happy spouses should buy the commodity against the partner's will only if it is really needed. The correlation between the need for a commodity and frequency of buying or not buying should be positively correlated in happy couples. No significant correlation is expected in unhappy couples.

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## METHOD<sup>1</sup>

Eighty-seven households in the city of Linz, Austria, were randomly selected from the local telephone book, approached by student interviewers, and asked to participate in a scientific investigation. The data from eight households had to be discarded, because of missing answers or incomplete scoring.

The subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire which consisted of four questions. They had to imagine wanting to buy a desirable product which was only useful for themselves. The husband buying or not buying was contrasted with the wife agreeing or disagreeing with the purchase, and vice-versa, the wife was the purchaser and her husband agreed or disagreed. The design resembled Kelley and Thibaut's (1978) interaction matrix approach.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the descriptions was followed by a scale of well-being and frequency of each situation. In addition the subjects rated their overall marriage satisfaction on a seven-point scale (from 1 = very satisfying to 7 = very dissatisfying), and indicated their age, years of living in a common household, number of children, educational level obtained by both partners, employment status and household income.

## RESULTS

The wife's and husband's scores of marital satisfaction were averaged and the resulting scores dichotomized at the median. No significant demographic differences were found between happy and unhappy spouses.

From hypothesis (a) we expected that in happy relationships unpleasant situations are more likely to be avoided than in unhappy relationships.

A within-subject correlation was calculated between estimated frequency of occurrence and well-being rated over all four situations for the active spouse. Those correlation scores were z-transformed and analyzed by means of a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA (high vs. low marriage satisfaction by husband vs. wife, within units), the couple being the unit of analysis.

The results confirmed the hypothesis. There was a higher correlation between frequency of situations and well-being with satisfying ( $M = 0.51$ ) than with unsatisfying marriages ( $M = 0.20$ ;  $F(1,69) = 9.83$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ).

Hypothesis (b) stated that the disagreement situation – that is the situation where one spouse buys against the other's will – will be less frequent in happy than in unhappy couples. This was tested by the overall frequency of the conflict situation.<sup>3</sup> A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA (marriage satisfaction by sex, within units) was applied. This ANOVA design was used for all the following analyses with frequency and well-being as dependent variables. Conflict was experienced relatively more often in unhappy ( $M = 0.96$ ) than in happy families ( $M = 0.89$ ;  $F(1,77) = 7.08$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There also was a significant main effect for the sex of respondent. Husbands reported somewhat more frequently being in conflict ( $M = 0.95$ ) than wives ( $M = 0.90$ ;  $F(1,77) = 5.90$ ;  $p < 0.02$ ).

Hypothesis (c), concerning the degree of mutual support was tested by subtracting the mean ratings of frequency of the purchasing spouse for situations where the partner opposed the purchase from the mean ratings in situations where the partner agreed. This hypothesis was supported. Spouses in satisfying

Table 1. Correlations between relative product utility and relative frequency of purchase when the partner opposes the purchase, by marriage satisfaction and sex.

	Happy marriage	Unhappy marriage
Husband	0.69* (30)	0.17 (34)
Wife	0.06 (34)	0.46* (36)

Numbers in parentheses indicate cell frequencies. Rao's test for all four coefficients: chi-square = 10.09; d.f. = 3;  $p < 0.05$ ; Rao's test for husbands only: chi-square = 6.68; d.f. = 1;  $p < 0.01$ ; Rao's test for wives only: chi-square = 3.09; d.f. = 1; n.s.; Rao's test for happy marriages: chi-square = 9.01; d.f. = 1;  $p < 0.01$ ; Rao's test for unhappy marriages: chi-square = 1.74; d.f. = 1; n.s.

\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

relationships reported a higher proportion of agreement relative to oppositional situations ( $M = 0.17$ ) than spouses in dissatisfying relationships ( $M = 0.03$ ;  $F(1,77) = 17.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

We further hypothesized (d) that spouses in happy marriages will tend to realize the purchasing desires against their partners' wishes only if the desire is relatively strong, outweighing their concern for their partners' opinion. This assumption implies a positive correlation between the degree of well-being that can be gained by purchasing the commodity and the frequency of actually buying the commodity despite the opposition of the partner.

Computing the correlation between the scores<sup>4</sup> yielded the degree of correspondence between purchasing need and buying. Such a correlation was calculated separately for wives and husbands in happy and unhappy families. The data are presented in Table 1. Hypothesis (d) is true only for men. Husbands in happy marriages show a higher correlation between purchasing need and buying frequency if the wife opposes the purchase, while wives do so only in unhappy marriages (Table 1).

## DISCUSSION

In general, we found that the more satisfying the relationship the more frequently the spouses supported each other's purchasing desires, and the more the other's opinion affected subjective well-being.

As hypothesized in (a), couples in happy marriages more frequently reported the sorts of purchasing situations which lead to higher satisfaction; less satisfying situations were reported less frequently. In unhappy relationships the correlation between frequency of occurrence and well-being was significantly lower. This result indicates that happy spouses are willing to cooperate in seeking situations which both partners associate with positive feelings, whereas spouses in unhappy relationships are less willing and able to find commonly satisfying situations.

The purchasing situation which challenges subjective well-being most is buying a desired commodity against the partner's will. If happy couples are more willing and able to avoid dissatisfying situations than unhappy couples, it follows that conflict is more likely to occur in unhappy relationships. As expected, conflict was reported by both wives and husbands to occur more frequently in unhappy than in happy relationships.

Birchler, Weiss and Vincent (1975), contrary to Gottman (1979), reported that happy couples experience positive interactions more frequently than unhappy couples. In our data positive interactions – that is, the agreement situation 1 – were experienced more often by happy than by unhappy couples ( $M = 1.19$  versus  $1.13$ ;  $F(1,77) = 6.46$ ;  $p < 0.02$ ), thus supporting Birchler *et al.*'s findings.

It is impossible to tell from the present design if conflict results in marital dissatisfaction or if a couple's unhappiness causes conflict. It might be that couples become progressively unhappy, if they are unable to avoid unpleasant situations. In this case their inability to avoid unpleasant situations would cause dissatisfaction in marriage. On the other hand, unwillingness or inability to avoid unpleasant situations might result in marital dissatisfaction. Both interpretations are plausible but the present data do not allow us to ascertain the correct one.

Conflict in marriage can be avoided if the passive partner agrees to the other's wishes. The passive spouses, in fact, used different strategies in conflict resolution, depending on the quality of the marriage. We found that in happy relationships the passive spouse more frequently supports the other's desires than in unhappy relationships. This result is in line with Barry's (1970) findings. In our data, however, not only do husbands in happy relationships give greater support to their wives, but wives also supported their husbands more often than in unhappy marriages.

We expected that happy spouses would be more likely than unhappy spouses to reject a purchasing desire if the need for the commodity was fairly low. This hypothesis turned out to be true only for husbands. In happy relationships, husbands buy the commodity despite their wife's opposition only if the commodity is strongly needed (Table 1). No significant correlation was found for women. This difference is interesting but difficult to interpret. It could be that 'need for the commodity', as conceptualized here, has different meanings for husbands and wives.

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## NOTES

1. A complete description of the material and procedure can be obtained upon request (cf. Wagner, Kirchler and Brandstätter, 1983).
2. The subjects had to imagine each of the following situations: situation 1 (the subject buying, his/her partner agreeing); situation 2 (the subject not buying, his/her partner

agreeing); situation 3 (the subject buying, his/her partner disagreeing=conflict); situation 4 (the subject not buying, his/her partner disagreeing). The buying or not buying spouse is called the active subject, the other is called passive.

3. It must be noted here that neither the original ratings for frequencies or for well-being were used. The original frequency ratings were transformed into relative frequencies by dividing the original score by the overall mean of all four frequency ratings for each spouse. Ratings for well-being were standardized from the single original well-being score for each spouse. Both transformations yielded scores that were independent of individual or group-specific biases in scale use. In the following, the term frequency and well-being score refer to the transformed variables.
4. The scores were transformed by calculating the difference in well-being situation 3 and 4, yielding a score which reflects the net gain in product utility after considering the impact upon family life due to neglecting one's partner's wishes to the contrary. A positive score indicates product utility outweighing concern for one's partner's opinion; a negative score indicates the opposite. Second, the difference in frequency between situations 3 and 4 for the purchasing spouse was computed. A positive score reflects relatively more buying than no-buying situations.